

U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE TO ADD STAFF IN NEVADA, ENSIGN SAYS

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By STEVE TETREAULT
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WASHINGTON -- Attorney General Alberto Gonzales has authorized hiring seven lawyers and a half dozen support workers for the U.S. attorney's office in Nevada, Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., said Monday.

The attorneys would fill vacancies that had gone unfunded in the fast-growing district. The Justice Department previously announced in March that five of the jobs were being filled.

The hires, who could be brought on board over the summer, will bring the federal prosecutor force in the state to or near its full staff federal allocation, Ensign said. The six support workers being hired include researchers.

"Nevada's office has been understaffed for too long, and despite our state's rapid growth, the office has fewer employees now than it did in 2002," Ensign said.

The Nevada office is authorized for 45 attorneys, former U.S. attorney Dan Bogden said. There were 38 at the start of the year.

Justice Department officials in Washington and Las Vegas had no comment on Monday evening.

Ensign began pressing Gonzales to boost staffing in Las Vegas and Reno after the Justice Department fired Bogden in December. As he departed, Bogden said the district was being ill served by staffing shortfalls.

"We could go up to 60 attorneys and we couldn't keep up with the growth in the state," Bogden said in April. "We were just trying to keep the lights on in the place."

Ensign acknowledged Monday he has muted criticism of Gonzales while discussing Nevada staffing and other matters, including his call for the Justice Department to admit it erred in firing Bogden by helping find the former appointee a new job.

Most Democrats and a half dozen Republicans -- including four other lawmakers from Nevada -- have called for the attorney general to quit or be fired over his handling of the firing of nine U.S. attorneys last year.

"Enough people were calling for his resignation," Ensign said. "I wanted to make sure that instead of playing politics, we were solving a problem and I think that is what we have done."

The Justice Department also is revamping job performance reviews for U.S. attorneys, Ensign said, another outcome of his pressure on officials.

Contacted on Monday, Bogden said the staff additions were "an initial, long overdue step in the right direction.

"Despite Nevada being one of the fastest growing districts in the United States over the past 10 or so years, our manning and resources have been grossly deficient and our attempts to get the necessary and adequate resources for the (U.S. attorney's office) has been a constant and ongoing struggle," he said in an e-mail.

Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., applauded the move.

"It is important that our state have the tools and the manpower to prosecute federal crimes, especially given how quickly Nevada is growing," Reid said. "I'm glad we'll have more people on the ground working to keep Nevada safe."